Gainda

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A reflective essay on theatre, memory, and the fragile persistence of shared spaces and human solidarities in contemporary Bengal.

Kerala, where I come from, remains a place where communities mingle freely, its social fabric woven across lines of faith and community with an ease that other parts of India seldom manage. Bengal's history has been more complicated, marked by memories and inheritances that still linger quietly beneath the surface of everyday life. Like Punjab, the experience of Partition left behind wounds that never entirely healed, shaping social worlds in ways subtle but enduring. Even where affinities survived through a shared language and a shared soil, the city often remained socially fragmented in quieter, less visible ways.

With such histories layered beneath the city's skin, marriages across communities have remained rare. When they did happen, as it did between Priyanka Todi, daughter of the scion of Lux Innerwear, and Rizwanur, a young Muslim man from one of the poorer neighbourhoods on the margins of the city, the bride's family and the system descended on him with a pressure so relentless that he took his own life on the railway tracks.

And yet, even where history had left communities wary of one another, love finds a way. It did so with Azhar and Uma. It was theatre that brought them together, that old democratic space where the only thing that matters is what you feel and how truthfully you can render it. Azhar was a growing name in Urdu theatre; Uma had already made her mark in Hindi. Somewhere in the rehearsals and the long conversations that theatre always produces, they fell in love, and eventually set up their own group, *Little Thespians*, as though declaring that the stage itself would be the home they built together.

I met Azhar at Darjeeling Government College, where he was in the Urdu department. Theatre was his passion, but like me he was in the W.B.E.S., navigating the particular life of a government college lecturer far from the plains. In faraway Darjeeling, unlike other postings where you commute home after classes and the day simply ends, we would freshen up after college and the same crowd would drift together towards the serene Mall, that unhurried promenade where Bengali tourists in monkey caps would stop and exclaim at the beauty of Kanchenjunga, its white peaks catching the last of the afternoon light in the distance. He got transferred to the plains before I did. He went to Maulana Azad College, where there was a full-fledged Urdu department and a life closer to the world he loved. I found myself at Chandernagore Government College, earlier called Dupleix College after the French governor, in a town which, like our Mahe, had once been a French settlement. Meetings became less frequent, though they still happened occasionally, including a memorable afternoon spent in the gullies behind Tipu Sultan Mosque, savouring biryani.

Of his theatre, I saw only one play in Kolkata. It was called *Gainda*, adapted from a work by Eugène Ionesco and reshaped for its time and place. It told the story of a society steadily turning

thick-skinned and impenetrable. As the world on stage hardened into something unfeeling, Azhar's character remained the last fragile holdout against that transformation. Watching him inhabit that refusal, holding on to tenderness while everything around him surrendered to a performed brutishness, was not something one easily forgot.

It remained the only play of his I would ever see. When the second deadly wave of Covid swept through, Azhar travelled to Delhi to receive an award, a recognition of a life devoted to theatre. He returned carrying the virus, and he never recovered. The stage he had built, the group he had founded with Uma, all of it endured. But he did not. In the end, he remained what he had always been, the one who never learned to grow a thick skin. And perhaps that is why his life, and the quiet defiance of the theatre he built, still matter in today's Bengal, at a time when shared spaces, easy solidarities, and the ordinary intimacies between communities appear to be receding a little more each day.

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